DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 056 RC 023 052

AUTHOR Zapf, M. K.; Bastien, B.; Bodor, R.; Carriere, J.; Pelech, W.

TITLE The Learning Circle: A New Model of BSW Education for Alberta's Rural, Remote, and Aboriginal Communities.

PUB DATE 2000-05-00

NOTE 9p.; In: Issues Affecting Rural Communities (II). Proceedings of the International Conference [on] Rural Communities & Identities in the Global Millennium (Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada, May 1-5, 2000); see RC 023 040.

PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS *Access to Education; American Indian Education; *Canada Natives; College Programs; Community Involvement; *Culturally Relevant Education; Distance Education; Foreign Countries; Geographic Isolation; Higher Education; *Partnerships in Education; Program Descriptions; *Program Development; *Rural Education; Social Work

IDENTIFIERS Alberta; University of Calgary (Canada)

ABSTRACT

In 1998, a consortium including the University of Calgary (Alberta) and representatives from social service agencies and Native organizations developed a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) model for delivery in rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities. The model called for innovative course content that was culturally and geographically relevant to Metis and First Nations peoples; was aligned with traditional philosophies and knowledge systems; was flexible in time, place, and mode; and integrated the best of distance education technology with face-to-face opportunities. The conventional program structure was changed to a predominately nonhierarchical structure--the "Learning Circle." Core content was organized into four main theme areas that comprised the outer ring of the Learning Circle. Students could take them in any order. Optional courses, the inner ring, could be taken at any time in the program. The four theme courses, related projects, and optional courses would be completed before the practicum, at the center of the Learning Circle, was begun. Instruction was begun in January 2000 with 73 students at 6 sites. Lessons learned include an expanded meaning of "access" that encompasses cultural relevance, the need for realistic time frames for initial program development, the discovery of community-level confusion about requirements for degree completion, the need for a flexible definition of "full-time student," and the need to move slowly in integrating distance education technology. (TD)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original document.

ED 455 056

THE LEARNING CIRCLE: A New Model Of BSW Education For Alberta's Rural, Remote, And Aboriginal Communities

M.K. Zapf, B. Bastien, R. Bodor, J. Carriere & W. Pelech, Canada

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

J.C. Montgomery

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

RC 023052

THE LEARNING CIRCLE: A New Model Of BSW Education For Alberta's Rural, Remote, And Aboriginal Communities

M.K. Zapf, B. Bastien, R. Bodor, J. Carriere & W. Pelech, Canada

Abstract

According to the University of Calgary Calendar, the BSW program prepares students for entry-level general social work practice by providing opportunities for students to acquire sufficient knowledge, values, and skills to enable them to maintain a professional standard of practice. The University of Calgary has been graduating social work students for more than 30 years. At the BSW level, students have been able to study on the Calgary campus or at Divisions located in Edmonton and Lethbridge. In spite of a provincial mandate for undergraduate social work education in the province of Alberta, the Faculty of Social Work has not had the resources to make its undergraduate social work program available on an ongoing basis outside of these three urban locations.

Recognizing the importance of access to a BSW education for Albertans living in rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities, a consortium of interest groups developed a proposal in 1998 to apply for Access funding from the provincial government. Entitled the *Alberta Social Work Degree Accessibility Plan: Virtual Learning Circles* (BSW Access Proposal), this document reflected the collaborative work of many stakeholder groups including the University of Calgary, the Northern BSW Stakeholders' Council (representatives from Children's Services Regions, Metis settlements, Metis zones, First Nations and tribal organizations, northern regions of Family & Social Services, private northern service agencies, post-secondary institutions under the Alberta North umbrella), and FNAHEC (First Nations Adult & Higher Education Consortium, with member colleges and education boards from the Treaty 6 and Treaty 7 areas plus the North Peace Tribal Council).

The need for social work education outside of Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge was not a new concept. Communities, agencies, and institutions in rural and remote regions had expressed their needs over a period of many years, as had the Alberta Association of Registered Social Workers. During the 1990's, the Faculty of Social Work had conducted three separate studies examining feasibility and program models for distance education in social work. None of these earlier efforts had been successful in securing funding to develop such a program. Given the apparent high demand, the collaborative nature of this proposal involving many community stakeholder groups, and the provincial government's recent interest in access to higher education in rural regions (expressed through Access Funding Envelopes), the BSW Access Proposal was approved for funding in late February 1999.

BSW Access Proposal Principles

Several principles for a re-designed BSW curriculum were declared in the BSW Access Proposal. Specific guidelines called for "innovative course content" (p. 9) that will be "culturally and geographically relevant" (p. 6). BSW curriculum content and delivery modes were to be "adapted" (p. 6) and "re-designed" (p. 10) to be "sensitive to First Nations and Metis peoples" (p. 6) and "aligned with traditional philosophies and knowledge systems" (p. 11). Course delivery methods were to be "flexible in time, place, and mode" (p. 5), with course scheduling "based on a flexible entry model and home community placements" (p. 11). This new program was to feature a "mutually designed infrastructure" to integrate "the best of distance education technology with face-to-face professor /student and student/student educational opportunities" (p. 2).

At the same time as all these innovative directions were prescribed for curriculum content and delivery, the BSW Access Proposal also made very clear that the new program had to be "of the same quality as the programs currently delivered on-site by the Faculty," and must lead to the "University of Calgary accredited social work degree" which "adheres to national accreditation standards" (p. 1). This two-pronged set of expectations presented a real challenge. The new model was to be recognizable as the accredited University of Calgary BSW degree program while at the same time featuring curriculum and delivery modes that were re-designed, innovative, flexible, and culturally sensitive.

BSW Access Division Team

Funding for the BSW Access Proposal was announced in late February 1999. The Faculty of Social Work reviewed the tasks and determined that the proposed Access activities would best be carried out by creating a new Division, parallel in structure and reporting relationships to the existing Edmonton or Lethbridge Divisions. On April 1, 1999, the Faculty assigned a senior faculty member with relevant experience as Division Head of the new BSW Access Division for the development and implementation work (a contribution from Faculty funds not Access funds). Recruitment efforts began to fill the new positions for the Access Division team.

Recruitment for the BSW Access faculty positions was a lengthy and complex process. For the first time in the University's history, the Selection Committee included

RC 023052

Aboriginal persons from community stakeholder groups as full voting members. An Elder from Grande Prairie and an Education Counsellor from Old Sun College participated in the Selection Committee along with representatives from the Faculty of Social Work and an Aboriginal faculty member from Sociology. Some 35 strong applications were received from across the country and several rounds of interviews and presentations were conducted. The Selection Committee spent over 50 hours in May and June involved with interviews and meetings before specific offers were made.

The resulting Access Division Team is well balanced in terms of gender and cultural heritage: one First Nations woman, one Metis woman, two non-Native males; all with extensive related experience and all with a PhD degree or in the process of completing a doctorate. More detailed profiles of the Access Division team members can be found in Appendix I. Newly recruited faculty members had to disengage from academic and employment commitments elsewhere before joining the Access project, however, and this meant that a full Access Division team was not actually in place until mid-summer 1999.

Curriculum Design Process

In August of 1999, the new BSW Access Team developed a draft model for a re-designed curriculum to meet the various requirements set forth in the original BSW Access Proposal. Called the Learning Circle, the draft model was taken to various stakeholder groups across the province for consideration and discussion at open meetings in early and mid-September. Through this community collaboration process, modifications and revisions were identified before the model was taken to the University for program approval in late September. Changes were incorporated to meet an October 1 deadline for inclusion of new courses in the University Calendar. In other words, a mutually designed and approved BSW Access Program was "official" by October with approved course descriptions and numbers for students to register for credit. Once approved for the University Calendar, the new version of the BSW program through the Access Division was promoted to potential applicants in the communities through October and November 1999 with full information concerning the new course offerings, course numbers, degree requirements, program duration, costs, and registration procedures.

The Learning Circle

Several major adaptations to the Calgary BSW curriculum and structure were required to comply with the expectations of the BSW Access Proposal. Overall program structure was altered from the conventional sequential format (involving core pre-requisites and advanced courses) to a predominantly non-hierarchical structure – the "Learning Circle."

Core content was organized into four main "theme" areas considered important for practice in rural, remote, and aboriginal communities. These four theme areas are:

- Generalist Practice in Context
- Communications & Information
- Diversity & Oppression
- Social Work Methods

These four theme areas comprise the outer ring of the Learning Circle. Students also take three social work option courses then move on to the practicum experience at the centre of the Learning Circle. Following is a diagram of the Learning Circle model (with the half-course equivalent value of the various courses indicated in parentheses following the course name [Editor's note: The Learning Circle appears at the conclusion of this paper).

Students can register with the BSW Access Division to begin in either Fall or Winter Session, entering the Learning Circle according to the theme area being delivered at that time in their location. Social work option courses may be taken at any time in the program, but specific option offerings are made available in block format during Spring/Summer Session. The final component of the Learning Circle model is the practicum. Following the direction of the BSW Access Proposal, students can take their practicum placement in their own community or region with a flexible schedule to be negotiated individually between the student, local agency, and the faculty. Normally, the four theme courses, related projects, and option courses would be completed before an Access student begins practicum.

Each theme course includes core curricula which has been specifically adapted for application in rural, remote and aboriginal contexts:

- The Generalist Practice in Context Theme Course examines knowledge, values, and skills pertaining to the practice of generalist social work practice with particular attention to practice issues and alternative approaches in the context of rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities.
- The Communication and Information Theme Course provides instruction in effective communication and information management practices. Included in this theme course are modules relating to cross-cultural communication, interviewing, report writing, research methods, and the use of technology in social work research and practice. Particular attention is paid to the issues of influence and informed decision-making in non-urban settings.
- The Diversity and Oppression Theme Course addresses issues of diversity, colonization, and intergroup relations. Included in this theme course are

modules relating to decolonization, social policy, human growth and development, and program evaluation with an emphasis on power issues affecting outlying communities.

- The Social Work Methods Theme Course offers specific instruction in intervention approaches and includes modules dealing with casework, groupwork, organizational change and practice in rural, remote and Aboriginal communities.

Each theme course includes modules focused on 'Local Applications' where local resource persons present information and lead discussion with students in an attempt to connect course content with current practice and policy issues in the local region.

Accompanying each theme course is a Portfolio Project which challenges the student to integrate his or her professional and lived experience (including learning from the theme course) into a reflective project involving supported independent study. For example, in the Generalist Practice in Context Portfolio Project students are asked to develop a portfolio that demonstrates their own developing model of social work practice. In the Diversity and Oppression Portfolio Project students are asked to prepare and present a major project which assesses local policies and programs with respect to diversity issues and colonial assumptions.

In consideration of the often limited number of agencies and qualified supervisors available in many rural, remote and Aboriginal communities, the Access Division requires that students complete one practicum placement (rather than the conventional two) during their program of studies. That one placement, however, must meet the requirements specified in the accreditation standards of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work including the prescribed number of hours. Accompanying the practicum is an Integrative Practice Seminar that promotes the integration of theory and practice within the local region practicum.

Delivery of a full theme course features a series of eight 9-hour modules. Course modules have been scheduled bi-weekly to accommodate the employment status of most Access students, and to allow sufficient time for students to complete course readings and short assignments associated with each module. Some communities scheduled modules for Thursday night and all day Friday; others preferred Friday night and all day Saturday.

The BSW Access Proposal called for delivery methods that would integrate distance education technology with face-to-face instruction. Based on the feedback from our community meetings and discussions with other distance educators, the BSW Access Division made a decision to gradually integrate distance education technology into the delivery of our courses. Student and community reaction to our first course offerings are crucial to the credibility and success of the Learning Circle model at the community level. (We have been told that Elders in some communities encouraged their "best and most resilient" students to sign up for these first courses; others will be encouraged to apply later if the first experience is good.) Through our community meetings and some initial trials with video-conferencing, Access Division members learned that students clearly favoured face-to-face instruction. Cognizant of the crucial need for relationship building in the early stages of our program, the Access Division decided to first establish our presence and develop relationships with students at our various program sites. As students progress through the program, we can incorporate relevant technology in the Learning Circle model to support our instruction, reduce costs, and further increase access.

Sites

Following the community meetings in the fall of 1999, a total of 107 persons applied to the BSW Access Division. Of this pool, 83 were eligible either for full admission to the Faculty (36 students) or to commence classes with unclassified status (47students) while completing their remaining general education courses required for admission. Based on an analysis of the distribution of applicants, the BSW Access Division commenced instruction in January 2000 at six locations across the province (Standoff, Hobbema, Slave Lake, Grande Prairie, Peace River, and High Level). Some 73 students are currently taking courses at those sites.

Based on the profile of applicants, BSW Access Division delivery sites were confirmed in Standoff, Hobbema, Slave Lake, Grande Prairie, Peace River and High Level. Our southern most site is located at Red Crow College near Standoff Alberta on the Blood Reserve with 14 students this term. Dr. Betty Bastien is the Access Division faculty member responsible for site coordination and liaison with students at Red Crow College. Further north is our site located at Maskwachees Cultural College in Hobbema with 13 students this term. Jeannine Carriere is the Access Division faculty member responsible for site coordination and liaison at that location. North of Edmonton is our Slave Lake site at Northern Lakes College with 12 students. Ralph Bodor is the Access Division faculty member responsible for liaison and Anne Marie McLaughlin is responsible for site coordination in Slave Lake. Further west are the BSW Access Division sites in Peace River and Grande Prairie. Our program site in Grande Prairie is located at Grande Prairie Regional College with 14 students this term. Fairview College hosts our Peace River site with 9 students. Site coordinators in Grande Prairie and Peace River are Lana Wells and Joan Wahl respectively. Or northern most site is located at the North Peace Tribal Council near High Level with 9 students. Our site coordinator in High Level is Kerri Cardinal. William Pelech is the Access Division faculty member responsible for liaison in Peace River, Grande Prairie and High Level.

Lessons Learned

The Faculty of Social Work has learned many important lessons from the early stages of the Learning Circle model and the BSW Access Division. We have attempted here to identify some of the major lessons that may be valuable to others contemplating or currently involved with outreach social work education.

Lesson #1: The Expanded Meaning of "Access"

In many discussions regarding post-secondary education, "improving access" has meant simply increasing the number of students registered in a particular program. The outcome measure of access for many programs is a simple matter of enrolment numbers. From this perspective, the BSW Access funding could have been targeted solely towards increasing the number of BSW students from rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities taking the mainstream curriculum. Clearly, increased enrolment was a goal, but the BSW Access Proposal that was approved and funded identified another crucial component of "access" with regard to social work curriculum.

Some students from rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities who had attended our urban campus locations (Calgary, Edmonton, and Lethbridge) for their BSW education had complained that the curriculum was not "accessible" in that it was rooted in urban Western European assumptions that may not be compatible with the perception of issues and helping practices in non-urban settings. From this cultural perspective, relevance becomes a major component of accessibility. This notion of cultural relevance as a component of access demands much more from an Access program than simply putting students in seats.

Prior to any effective recruitment of students, the Access Division had to develop a whole new BSW program model (the Learning Circle) relevant for rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities. This expanded notion of "access" can be easily misunderstood or overlooked by funders and decision-makers who are only interested in the bottom-line of students in seats.

Lesson #2: Realistic Time Frames

The original BSW Access Proposal had assumed a start-up date of January 1, 1999. The first phase of development was to be a 2-month period (Jan-Feb) during which a Distance Planning Circle would conduct an environmental scan and put together a development plan. The second phase (Mar-Apr-May) was for curriculum development and partnership agreements. The third phase (June-July-Aug) involved professional preparation of the redesigned curriculum materials. Courses then were to begin in September 1999 with an expectation of 50 students.

This original schedule did not account for the time required for recruitment of a new faculty team for the Access Division. The BSW Access Proposal was not funded until late February 1999 and a new Access Division team was not in place until mid-summer. The Learning Circle curriculum model was developed by the Access Team in the month of August, then had to be taken to the Faculty, the Alberta Association of Registered Social Workers, and the various community stakeholder groups for feedback, revisions, and approval. After this came the complex process of seeking approval for the new courses and requirements from multiple levels of University administration. BSW Access course offerings in September 1999, as envisioned in the original Proposal, were simply not possible unless we had completely ignored the mandate to develop new and relevant curriculum with the involvement of the stakeholder groups. Endorsed by the University and all community stakeholder groups, a decision was made in September 1999 to delay initial BSW Access course offerings until January 2000.

Lesson #3: "2+2" Does Not Always Equal "2+2"

In our community meetings and discussions with some colleges in the fall of 1999, we discovered that the catch-phrase "2+2" can have two very different meanings in different educational contexts. The resulting confusion directly affected our recruitment process and led to a sense of frustration on the part of some potential students as well as their employers and communities.

Within the university social work education community, most BSW degrees are achieved through four-year undergraduate programs that begin with two years of general arts & science courses followed by two years of social work courses. The University of Calgary BSW program follows this model, commonly described as "2+2" to indicate the two full years of general studies followed by two full years of social work. In some college contexts, however, the phrase "2+2" denotes a program whereby a student completes a 2-year college diploma program followed by 2 years of university to achieve the undergraduate degree in that discipline. Some stakeholders apparently believed this to be the case for the BSW Access model. They thought that someone with a social work diploma could move directly into year 3 of the BSW program.

Throughout the community stakeholder meetings and the proposal development stage for the BSW Access model, the Faculty of Social Work thought it was being very clear that the BSW via Access was still a "2+2" degree. Access students would be expected to have completed two full years of general studies courses or equivalent to be eligible for admission to years 3 and 4 of the BSW offered through the Access Division. It appears that some community stakeholders supported our "2+2" model assuming that diploma graduates would move directly into year 3 of the

BSW. Some were disappointed to discover that additional arts courses had to be completed in order to be eligible for admission into the BSW program.

Resolution of this "2+2" misunderstanding has been attempted in several ways. Some diploma graduates are concentrating on completing their required arts courses before applying to the BSW Access Division at a later date. Others, with five or less arts courses remaining to complete, have been admitted to the first BSW Access offerings as unclassified students who will continue working on their arts courses while taking their social work courses. We expect that these students will take longer than 2 full years to complete their BSW degree requirements through the Access Division.

Lesson #4: "Full-time" is a Relative Concept

In some discussions, "full-time" refers to a full load of ten half-course equivalents (HCE's) per year or 5 HCE's per term. The BSW Access Proposal budget made several references to "full-time" students. That same Proposal, however, also directed that the schedule of Access courses should be flexible and responsive to community needs and requirements. When the Access Division team travelled to communities to discuss appropriate course loads, we found something very different from any assumed urban campus notion of "full-time." Many potential BSW Access students were attracted to this model because they were not able to leave family, community, and employment for an extended period of time. It follows that most could not assume a load of 5 HCE's per term and continue with employment and family/community commitments. This situation is not only an individual student concern but a community issue as well. Consider a small community where 9 or 10 social workers with diplomas wish to take their BSW via Access. These people may be the backbone of the local social service network which would collapse if everyone left. Employers and outlying communities cannot afford to lose most or all of their resource workers to full-time study.

This was the message we heard loud and clear in the communities. A maximum of 3 HCE's per term would be workable. Offering 3 half-courses per term in any given site would allow the students to take either one or two or all three if they are able. Many are also working on remaining arts courses required for admission. In general, students taking 3 HCE's per term are considered "full-time" for funding purposes from their bands or tribal councils.

BSW Access students can also take up to three block elective courses offered in spring/summer term. In other words, an Access student can take 9 HCE's in a calendar year, but would be counted as only taking 3 on the enrolment figures for any one semester.

Future Directions - Workload and Future BSW Access Development

Fall 1999 was a very stressful time for the BSW Access Division Faculty members. Except for the Division Head, all were new to their University of Calgary faculty positions. Three are completing their own doctoral dissertations while working for the Access Division. This team developed an entire new curriculum model in the month of August. While this intense work is very rewarding, it is also demanding especially given the cross-cultural composition of our Team and our students. Much of the fall was spent on the road in community meetings, information sessions with potential students, and orientation sessions with actual students. In addition, the team worked to develop detailed Course Outlines and resources for the new courses to begin in January. Much effort was spent shepherding the new model through various stages of approval within the University and the communities. Our support staff person took on demanding roles as admissions coordinator and student advisor.

During this winter 2000 term, the Access Division team is delivering three totally new courses in six new sites ranging the length of the province. Much of the teaching is on weekends. Roundtrip travel to deliver a 9-hour course module can vary anywhere from 5 hours to 15 hours depending upon the site. At the same time, the Access Division faculty are trying to develop their spring/summer offerings plus the new course offerings for September.

We have learned in these first few months that we have overextended ourselves and there could be a danger of burnout. We tried to respond to stakeholder needs by offering courses in six sites this term, but that is a pace we cannot maintain. Some of our current sites will have new students added in the Fall 2000 term. We need to consolidate and develop these current sites, ensuring that we continue to offer a challenging and relevant curriculum. For the foreseeable future, it may be realistic to add no more than one new Access Division site per term.

Collaborative Development and the Planning Circle

The original BSW Access Proposal called for "extensive dialogue and joint decision making" in the development of the program. Suggestions were put forward for a structure to include "an overseeing Planning Circle," local Planning Circles, a Council of Elders, and a Curriculum Circle. Through "consensual Decision making," these groups were to be involved in "ongoing collaborative development of the program."

Although an important feature of the original vision, such a complex collaborative structure was not possible to implement prior to the first term BSW Access offerings. The new BSW Access Division team had only one month

to develop an entirely new curriculum model to take to the communities, stakeholder groups, professional association, and University for approval. (Some other schools of social work have allocated 2-3 years for distance-delivery development of their current program content, let alone an entirely new curriculum model.) It could have taken most of the fall to set up the collaborative structure and there would have been no courses ready to go in January 2000.

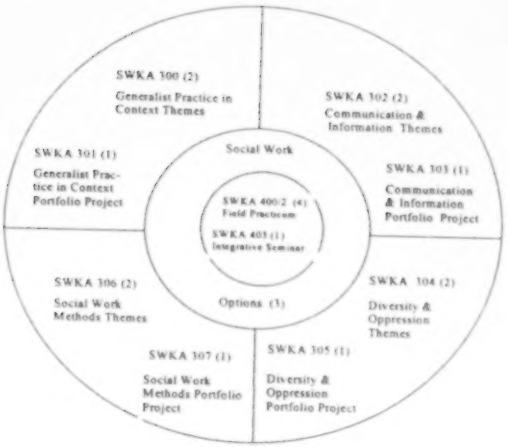
Certainly community stakeholder groups have been involved in the early stages of the BSW Access Division. They were represented on the Academic Selection Committee that hired the new faculty members. The team that was recruited includes First Nations, Metis, rural, and northern backgrounds The new course offerings feature modules devoted to "local applications" where Elders, healers, agency workers, and other community resource people are invited to class to help students connect the course material with local history, tradition, and issues. In this way, the BSW Access model is collaborative at the local region level, but work remains to be done on the larger Planning Circle concept.

Summary

Without the vision and creativity of those who assembled and supported the BSW Access Proposal, there would be no BSW Access Program today. Without the government's Access Funding, the Faculty of Social Work would still be unable to respond to the known demand for social work education in rural, remote, and Aboriginal communities across Alberta. The Access funding presented us with an opportunity and a responsibility. Through the Learning Circle model, we have worked to implement both aspects of "access" as it relates to social work education. With regard to content, we have developed and implemented a culturally relevant and accessible curriculum model that has been approved by the community stakeholder groups. With regard to enrolment numbers, our 80 students attending Winter 200 classes in six sites bring us very close in this first term to our targeted steady state.

One year ago, BSW Access was an unfunded vision. Six months ago, it was a formidable task faced by a team of brand new faculty members. Now it is a reality with some 73 students meeting with instructors in six Alberta communities ranging from High Level in the north to Standoff in the south.

THE LEARNING CIRCLE



BEST COPY AVAILABLE